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Good Intelligence

THE FLAP OVER THE latest intelligence estimate of the Soviet threat brings to public awareness the largely unnoted issue of the quality of intelligence: its relevance and incisiveness, its timeliness, its freedom from political or other bias. This is not so glamorous a matter as the conduct (or disclosure) of covert operations, or the collection of information by clandestine spies or exotic technologies. Thus it has received insufficient attention from intelligence practitioners and investigators alike. But for the President and his policy-makers, it is the main thing.

The current flap started building in 1975 when the generally conservative President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board suggested that an outside panel, composed entirely of specialists suspicious of detente, be permitted to second-guess ("competitive analysis") the intelligence community's annual Soviet estimate. A strong and savvy President would not have installed what has since been called, fairly, a "kangaroo court." An undistracted intelligence leadership would have blunted an exercise plainly trampling on the mutual trust that producers of intelligence need in order to offer their best judgment to their consumers—the policy makers. To see why, you need only consider where this exercise could end if the findings of the first "competitive review" did not fit somebody or other's preconceptions or predilections. Would the competition then be widened with the appointment of yet another team of second-guessers? This particular outsider estimate produced more alarm about Soviet intentions than had ever been expressed in this series before. But nobody seriously doubts that another outsider's group, composed of equally reputable authorities of a different persuasion, could produce a less alarming conclusion.

Now, let us keep first things first. The difference between the earlier intelligence community estimate and the new community-outsider estimate is essentially a judgment call, and a highly subjective one at that. Menace, like beauty, can be in the eye of the beholder. No significant new Soviet developments have been adduced. But the basic reason why any such significant difference in analysis can develop in the short space of a year lies in the uncertainties built into current Soviet policy. Soviet military programs are large enough, and Soviet political strategies adventurous enough, to support honestly differing interpretations of their intended purpose and ultimate scope. There is something real to argue about.

But that in turn underlines the need for high-quality intelligence estimates produced by a process itself commanding respect. We can think of no better formula for *bad* intelligence than to let a single-viewpoint panel with a heavy ideological flavor second-guess the making of the crucial estimate, at a time of transition when official analysts lack the firm support of their chiefs and the material being estimated is subject to unusually diverse judgments. We are in no position to contend that official analysts are without flaw or bias. We are quite aware that the procedures by which intelligence had best be produced are in dispute among experts. But we have little faith in a procedure so patently political as that by which the new estimate was produced. That the outsiders, supposedly experienced professionals, leaked a laudatory and self-serving account of their work ("we just licked them on a great number of points") only deepens our reservations.

Mr. Carter is said to have chosen Theodore Sorensen as his intelligence chief out of a judgment, developed in the course of the campaign, that the former Kennedy speechwriter has a special talent for working his way through a large mass of sometimes contradictory material and filtering the essence of it to the President without fear or favor. For reasons we have stated, we have some reservations about Mr. Sorensen's broader qualifications for the job. But if this is the way he intends to approach it—and if this is, indeed, his special talent—he will at least be bringing to the vital business of intelligence analysis a judicious even-handedness which was sorely lacking in the handling of this year's annual estimate of Soviet intentions.